Covid-19 and Radical Self-Care
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"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence,
it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."
Audre Lorde (1988)

In this short blog, I introduce the idea that we urgently need to radicalize 'self-care' from a feminist intersectional perspective. Imperatives towards self-care and well-being practices, such as yoga, meditation, crafts, exercise and healthy living circulated prominently when social isolation was introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. For some, quarantine and the closing down of facilities placing restrictions on social and public life due to home confinement might have opened up more 'leisure time'. Self-care and self-help practices might also have resonated with those intent on maintaining physical health, next to coping with psychological anxiety and mental health challenges. In a more existential vein, the 'slowing down' of society has also been characterized as a rupture towards a new social imaginary in an overaccelerated and overly productive world, a moment of introspection and opportunity to reconnect with what really matters and one's inner 'flow'. Lockdown has been likened to a spiritual retreat with the therapeutic benefits of restriction, such as acceptance, mindful living and practicing gratitude. Hence, as described by novelist Arundhati Roy, as a portal, the pandemic opens up opportunities for both engagement and disengagement.

Women's circle, Brooklyn NY, Gloetry Assembly. Photo: Jaymye Thomas, 2018.

However, as it has often been stressed, the Covid-19 crisis is experienced very differently depending on one's location and position in society, particularly regarding inequalities

related to socio-economic status and individual identity characteristics according to gender, race, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, etc. Feminist perspectives on Covid-19 have not only stressed how the pandemic affects women and men differently, but also how it can be understood as a 'crisis of care' with several gendered ramifications. Women are overrepresented among the essential and underpaid workers who *care for others.* In the private sphere, the closure of day-care and schools have also weighed heavy on those with caring responsibilities, especially mothers, faced with impossible simultaneous shifts of domestic work, child care, home schooling and paid labour.

For the majority of the population, therefore, the *care of the self* and access to well-being and leisure can be seen a privilege for the happy few with sufficient resources and time, before and even more so during the pandemic. Feminist theorists emphasize how Covid-19 exposes the invisibility and undervaluation of feminized and racialized social reproductive labour under global capitalism, such as healthcare, social care, food production and distribution. Hence, care, now more than ever, urgently needs to be at the front and centre of life, as the Care Collectiveargue in their plea for valuing mutual interdependence, for caring kinship relations, caring communities, caring economies and caring states after decades of neo-liberal profit-making, privatization and austerity measures.

Care of the self, by contrast, is viewed far more critically in the academic literature. Self-help, self-improvement and self-love are concepts that have emerged over the past decades in the global market of spiritual, happiness, therapy and wellness culture. A large part of the mainstream sphere of subjective-wellbeing also specifically caters to women. From Arlie Hochschild's (1994) analysis of the commercialization of feminism and intimate life in self-help manuals to more recent commentaries on celebrity wellness promotors such as Gwyneth Paltrow; products that range from books to journals, coaching, training, advice and apps often reproduce limited and exclusionary understandings of white 'empowered' heteronormative middle-class femininity. Well-being culture and holistic spirituality in general – *McMindfulness* – has been critically viewed as complicit with neo-liberal governmentality and consumerism. It holds the individual responsible and accountable for his, her or their own health, well-being and success rather than posing any real challenge to rampant structural inequalities in the family, education, workplace, society or on behalf of the 'uncaring' state (e.g., Cederström and Spicer 2015, Illouz 2008, Lau 2000, Purser 2019). Espousing these critical views of a neo-liberal and postfeminist framing of subjective well-being, I argue a more radical view of self-care is direly needed. Putting care at the centre of life, should not disregard, nor need it contradict, but must accompany a more equitable care of self and others, especially seeing the crisis of care which has been revealed and threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities in post-Covid times. My ethnographic research on subjective well-being culture across several West-European countries provides insight into the voices and experiences of women from a variety of sexual, national, class, age and ethnic backgrounds. I joined in gatherings such as women's circles (Longman 2018) (monthly meetings of small groups of women to heal, nourish, and empower themselves through relaxation, meditation, ritual and story-telling) and women's festivals (offering a variety of workshops and rituals related to holistic wellbeing in relation to mind-body-spirit). I also held in-depth interviews with women involved in these events in roles such as organizers, workshop leaders, trainers, consultants, life-coaches, therapists, healers, body-workers and ritual workers (Longman 2020). When geared to a 'global elite', women's wellbeing culture potentially reinforces white and class privilege. The need for 'women only spaces' sometimes also tends towards (cis-)gender essentialism as does a discourse on female

empowerment that prompts women to connect with their 'femininity' as a source of strength and agency. However, my research showed that wellbeing culture and its practitioners are highly diverse and the women I interviewed and observed cannot be simply categorized as postfeminist dupes out for personal gain.

Firstly, my results show how self-care is not exclusively performed individually, but that gathering and connecting involves alternative modes of knowing, healing, solidarity, collective agency and community-building that reject rather than simply affirm neo-liberal gender ideologies. Furthermore, slowing down, connecting to and nourishing one's body in an intuitive and positive sense; connecting to nature, to the non-organic, and to each other in non-judgmental and non-competitive way were seen by my interviewees as keys to personal and societal change vis-à-vis a world driven by profit, exploitation and inequality. Many were deeply concerned with social justice issues pertaining to e.g., education, health, climate warming, environmental pollution and the rise of right-wing politics and populism. Women attracted to the self-care milieu, some of whom are burnt out, disillusioned or simply want to quit the 'rat race' wished to reclaim their space and time. They questioned and resisted the continuous productivity *and* care for others that was demanded from and impinged upon them, whether at home, in their community and/or career. Hence women's well-being culture, its rituals, modes of sociality and caring practices, can potentially be understood as a response to and simultaneous contestation of the devaluation of women's social reproductive and affective care work.

The quote by the self-identified 'black feminist, lesbian, poet, mother, writer' Audre Lorde (1934-1992) at the beginning of this paper often serves as an inspirational quote in popular self-care memes in recent years. However, when studied more closely, it also connects to a largely obfuscated legacy, especially by feminist women of colour, and in black, indigenous, anti-racist and disability and health activism, of radical self-care that by no means excludes social engagement, political critique and activism (e.g., Facio and Lara 2014, hooks 2000, Lakshmi 2018, Lorde 2017, Rayburn and Comas-Díaz 2008). As black activists, like Angela Davies, for example, have recently emphasized, self-care practices are crucial for social justice activists in dealing with histories of violence and trauma, both for individual resilience and the sustainability of collective movements. Self-care and well-being in activist struggle can also be related to connecting through craft, art, spirituality, creativity and joy. Globally, self-care practices drawing on traditions in feminist spirituality, like women's circles, are also increasingly being introduced in disempowered or marginalized communities such as among minorities, migrants and refugees.

For transnational feminist practices during, and perhaps especially in Covid and post-Covid times, I think it is necessary to reflect and act more deeply on the meaning of care, and especially the way self-care can potentially be viewed as inter-linked with other-care and political change. This involves taking inequalities and differences in care work and social reproductive labour into account, and struggle against their exacerbation. It requires us to learn from and build bridges across different traditions that already exist in various critical activist histories and more contemplative movements. It also involves resisting the undervaluation, commodification, co-optation of care beyond the neo-liberal rhetoric of mere self-empowerment towards a more radical understanding.

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